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Romantic Rhyme and the Airs that Stray

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Abstract

Romantic poetry is striking for the richness and variety of its rhymes. If it is concerned to resist the constraints rhyme might impose, it also harnesses those constraints as a source of creativity, stimulating both comedy and pathos. This essay shows that Romantic poets find in rhyme a resource which amplifies many of their defining concerns: a fascination with incongruous states of vision, a desire to reconcile oneness and variety, and an aspiration to capture without arresting the evanescence of experience. Rhyme in the hands of Romantic poets, we suggest, speaks of disharmonies as much as of harmonies, and we conclude by pointing to the ways that later poets are both challenged and inspired by Romantic rhyme.

Keywords: Romantic, rhyme, constraint, liberty, off-rhyme, influence

To ascribe to Romantic poetry a special enthusiasm for rhyme might feel counter intuitive. Any effort to pin down the unifying poetic spirit of the age would have to take considerable notice of Wordsworth's endeavour to free poetry from 'artificial distinctions' of style;¹ and on the face of it rhyme is one feature of style liable to ensure poetry falls short of that ambition. '[R]hyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished with regular government', said Hazlitt, caricaturing the parallels between literary and political revolution in the period.² Of course, nobody 'looked on' rhyme quite so severely, but the parallels existed to be caricatured, and as Peter

McDonald has shown, this sort of left-leaning political ‘analogy’ looms behind much of what Romantic writers had to say about rhyme:³ from Leigh Hunt’s reflection on his couplets in *The Story of Rimini* as aiming at a ‘freer spirit of versification’ in the wake of those poets such as Pope whose ears ‘were only sensible of a marked and uniform regularity’,⁴ to Byron’s cheeky complaint about rhyme’s tyranny in *Don Juan*: ‘sometimes / Monarchs are less imperative than rhymes’ (V. 615-16).⁵ The resulting impulse was to ‘free’ English verse from ‘uniform regularity’, and in attempting to do that, Romantic poets had the example of Milton to turn to. Milton’s advertisement of his blank verse in *Paradise Lost* as ‘an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover’d to heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing’⁶ draws the battle lines between unrhymed ‘liberty’ and rhyming ‘bondage’ plainly enough. But in practice Milton’s ‘example’ amounts to more than unequivocal resistance. The closing lines of *Paradise Lost* point a way forward without leaving rhyme behind:

They looking back, all th’Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Wav’d over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful faces throng’d and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they drop’t, but wip’d them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide.
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitarie way.
(XII. 641-9)

Here Milton’s ‘liberation from rhyme’ comes to sound more like a ‘liberation of rhyme’, to deploy the terms in which T. S. Eliot reflected on *vers libre* some two and a half centuries later.⁷ Like rhyme itself, the lines look both back and

forward (and imagine a rhyme-like union in which both parties remain 'solitarie'); and although they are not rhymed conventionally, the way rhyme words wander across their surface brings into relief a delicate tension between sorrowful reflection and a hoped-for movement onwards. Poise is sustained through Milton's refusal to let 'Gate' shut too securely against 'seat' by having it rhyme more fully with 'late', as though any hope for closure must be shaded by unceasing regrets; through the carefully-weighted balance of mournfulness against resolve in the glancing consonance of 'drop't' (a fall in miniature) and 'wip'd' (a fall absorbed); and through the interlocking sounds of '*hand in hand* with *wandring* steps', where resolute togetherness yields to hesitant meandering. So when Wordsworth looked back to these lines at the start of *The Prelude* it was with his own sense of how rhyme's quieter wanderings might augment the 'liberated' spirit of blank verse:

The earth is all before me: with a heart
 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty
 I look about, and should the guide I chuse
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
 I cannot miss my way.

(*The Prelude* (1805), l. 59-63)

The slight chime of 'about' and 'cloud' is felicitous, since it implies a natural providence shaping the verse, and the path of diminishing internal rhyme which 'guides' us through 'me' to 'liberty' to 'way' (a path more apparent to the ear than the eye, for the way each word falls at the end of a clause) at once grants latitude to any notion of how rhyme occurs (this is hardly a neat scheme), and places trust in sound as a vehicle for intuitive discovery.

Given Milton's assertions about blank verse as a species of 'liberty', there are ramifications in his choosing to place, at the final enjambed line-ending of *Paradise Lost*, the word *choose*. For whatever one makes of the political analogies Hazlitt hammed up, the most obviously 'troublesome' attribute of rhyme is the 'bondage' which it seems to assert over poetic will: it causes writers 'to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse', as Milton saw it, 'than else they would have expressed them' ('The Verse', *Paradise Lost*). And most discussions of rhyme since Milton have returned to this problem. Edward Young, for instance, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) set down as a condition of rhyming 'well' that a poet 'must make rhyme consistent with as perfect sense, and expression, as could be expected if he was free from that shackle';⁸ and Peter McDonald has recently located in the Romantic period the renewal of an acute self-consciousness about the constraints of rhyme and the power it holds over poetic 'choice'. An 'awareness of rhyme as "a constraint of meaning", he says (quoting some remarks of William Keach's about Shelley), 'is a poetic feeling of a distinctively nineteenth-century cast, and the consciousness of the dangers posed by its becoming "a constraint on meaning" is central to the formal self-consciousness of much of the century's best poetry' (*Sound Intentions*, 7). But Romantic poets' consciousness of the 'dangers' of rhyme as a 'constraint' is often sharpened by their counter-awareness of its ability to gesture and to propel. The seemingly streamlined fluency of Keats's couplets in 'To Charles Cowden Clarke', for instance, manages to embody the virtues of the surrender it celebrates:

Just like that bird am I in loss of time,
 Whene'er I venture on the stream of rhyme;
 With shatter'd boat, oar snapt, and canvas rent,
 I slowly sail, scarce knowing my intent;
 Still scooping up the water with my fingers,
 In which a trembling diamond never lingers.
 (15-20)⁹

Keats shows how rhyming in a spirit of spontaneity can pay off – not least because the versification keeps his abandonment of ‘intent’ nervily in check. (It comes as bit of a surprise on looking back over the lines that they are all endstopped.) Part of the appeal lies in the distorted idioms shaped by the demands of meeting every rhyme: so you might imagine yourself talking about a ‘loss of time’, but it seems strange that Keats finds himself ‘in’ it; and although ‘trembling’ snags against ‘lingers’ in the last line quoted, it marks a floundering effort to arrest the ‘diamond’ whose beauty is held before us only as something that ‘never lingers’.

The feeling Keats puts on show that a managed ‘surrender’ to rhyme can prove unexpectedly evocative is more flamboyantly alive in the comic rhyming of Byron. ‘Prose-poets like blank verse, I’m fond of rhyme, / Good workmen never quarrel with their tools’, he says in *Don Juan* (l. 1605-6), as he sets himself against the fashion for blocking intrusions of poetic artifice. *Don Juan* is full of moments which make a virtue of a necessary yielding to rhyme’s powers. Having been cornered into the line ‘Which – as we say – or as the Scotch say *whilk*’ as he prepares to explain why Juan has tripped up while trying on a new suit of clothes, Byron apologises in the parenthetical aside mentioned earlier: ‘(The rhyme obliges me to this; sometimes / Monarchs are less imperative than

rhymes)' (V. 614- 16). 'The effect of a comic rhyme is as if the words, on the basis of their auditory friendship, had taken charge of the situation, as if, instead of an event requiring words to describe it, words had the power to create an event' said W. H. Auden,¹⁰ who elsewhere called Byron's poetry 'The most striking example I know in literary history of the creative role which poetic form can play'. It is a characteristically smart insight; and yet the power of such moments in Byron depends always on the impression that there is in the background a poet controlling, or at least readying himself to regain the ascendancy over, the very forces by which his verse is apparently being usurped. So on this occasion Byron regains his thread only to accentuate the rhyming contingencies that have tugged his poem off course:

Whilk, which (or what you please), was owing to
His garment's novelty, and his being awkward;
And yet at last he managed to get through
His toilet, though no doubt a little backward:
The negro Baba help'd a little, too,
When some untoward part of raiment stuck hard;
(*Don Juan*, V. 617-24)

It would hardly be possible to pick a rhyme more illustrative of rhyme's 'imperative' than 'awkward', and the stanza's travails in trying to find words which prove ingeniously matched to Juan's stumbling as he tries to get his clothes on.

The effect in Byron is not always of awkwardness, though, but often of sounds apparently just happening to happen. A nice correlative for the impression he enjoys giving of his rhymes being uncontrollably met exists in

the ‘careless’ unknowingness with which Julia ‘throws’ her hand upon Juan’s in Canto I:

She never would disgrace the ring she wore,
Nor leave a wish which wisdom might reprove;
And while she ponder’d this, besides much more,
One hand on Juan’s carelessly was thrown,
Quite by mistake—she thought it was her own...
(*Don Juan*, I. 868-72)

Carelessness is carefully orchestrated, and it would be a mistake to take Julia’s ‘mistake’ (or Byron’s unmistakable rhymes) for a genuine mistake.

But the capacity of Romantic poets to turn the ‘constraints’ of rhyme to their own ends is not only apparent in their playful moments. Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, a poem which McDonald rightly places at the heart of the ‘immense’ ‘change in rhyme’s significance’ at the start of the nineteenth century (*Sound Intentions*, 8), begins with a sentence in which the rhymes are as predictable as they are newly-turned:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell’d in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
(1-5)

McDonald speaks of the ‘ease’ and ‘obviousness’ of the rhymes here (and in ‘Resolution and Independence’ where the ‘stream’, ‘seem’, and ‘dream’ trio also appears) – and the ‘obviousness’ is very much part of the point (*Sound Intentions*, 109). The ode’s originality emerges out of its submission to an older, ‘sober’ consciousness whose familiar rhymes cast shadows of determinacy over

the 'freshness' of pre-poetic apprehensions. So 'dream' may tinge the 'stream' of 'common sight' with a visionary gleam, but the vision falters with that apparently innocuous 'did seem', hiding away in the truncated line as though aware that its disbelieving provisionality must deny 'stream' and 'dream' their temporal 'glory'. It is true that any rhyme is fated; but here rhymes bear a fated 'dream', a dream of unfallen visions haunted by an imaginings already fallen.

As it stood after Wordsworth's initial bout of composition in 1802, the 'Ode' returned to its opening rhyme sound in its closing lines: 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' (56-7). The couplet circles back in hope of finding temporary resting point amid the uncertain swaying between loss and recompense charted by the poem's irregular patterns of rhyme. 'Gleam' leads into 'dream' to counter the fading effect of those rhymes which earlier come in its trail, but it does so while posing a question about lost 'light' which asks just where its 'gleam' is 'now'. 'Gleam' and 'dream' is a 'quintessential' Romantic rhyme pairing, as Michael O'Neill points out in his essay in this issue. Its fascination depends upon its ability to evoke mobile relations between transience and transcendence, to leave aspirations tremulously achieved. 'Rhyme', says O'Neill, 'is a matter of spanning or failing to span abysses in Romantic poetry as much as it is an earnest of some ultimate harmony or fulfilment.'

Rhyme is a resource through which Romantic poetry makes its defining preoccupations 'heard'. For Blake, rhyme enjoys an ambivalent status centred upon the Miltonic conviction that 'Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race'.¹¹ That Blake turned his back upon the 'fettters' of rhyme over the trajectory of his

career might feel like the action of a poet who was worried that rhyming would subject his poetry to the kind of ‘mind-forged manacles’ made audible in ‘London’. But it is typical of Blake’s elusiveness that the lines from which that phrase is taken themselves end with a rhyme word, reminding us of rhyme’s capacity to spring surprises and inculcate subtlety rather than merely delineate predictable patterns: ‘The mind-forged manacles I *hear*’ (8) offers a troubled flash of insight into the correspondence between ‘mind’ and voice, even as Blake’s submission to rhyme marks an awareness that his voice might be infiltrated by the same mental conditioning.

Many of Blake’s most memorable apophthegms bring rhyme to mind: Los’s cry ‘I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans’ (*Jerusalem* (Plate 10, 20); ‘Without Contraries is no progression’ (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3); or the description of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as ‘Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul’. ‘The Tyger’ worries about creation’s ‘fearful symmetry’, and, as Lucy Kellett shows in her essay, the mechanical rigidity Blake perceives in rhyme and its ‘Monotonous Sing Song, Sing Song’ (‘Public Address’, *Milton*) fires into being the ‘confrontational’ formal freedom of his prophetic books. But Blake’s ‘meticulous technical skill’ ensures that his shorter poems, with their fascination with ‘contrary’ states of feeling and vision, deploy rhyme’s ‘Sing Song, Sing Song’ cadences to anything but ‘Monotonous’ ends. ‘Spring’, from *Songs of Innocence*, seems the most unaffected of lyrics. Its short lines thrust attention onto rhymes as innocent soundings of ‘delight’ – and the poem at first is little more than a lisping cascade of observations. But, for all the writing’s joyous simplicity, Blake’s

rhymes give an impression of discord as well as harmony, generating near-imperceptible shifts in mood at a sub-verbal level.

Sound the Flute!
Now it's mute.
Birds delight
Day and Night.
Nightingale
In the dale
Lark in Sky
Merrily
Merrily Merrily to welcome in the Year.

Little Boy
Full of joy.
Little Girl
Sweet and small,
Cock does crow
So do you
Merry voice
Infant noise
Merrily Merrily to welcome in the Year.

Little Lamb
Here I am.
Come and lick
My white neck.
Let me pull
Your soft Wool.
Let me kiss
Your soft face.
Merrily Merrily we welcome in the Year.

The poem begins with what sounds, given that *Songs* as a whole opens with the injunction to 'Pipe' ('Introduction', 5), like a self-reflexive comment on its own initiation, and the opening stanza proceeds through a harmonious series of full rhymes, augmented by internal chimes ('night | Nightingale'; 'Merrily | Merrily Merrily') which suggest rhyme's capacity to stimulate and to embody inspiration. Despite this, the opening couplet rings out oddly: 'Sound the Flute!

| Now it's mute.' Not only does the rhyme harmonise incongruous conditions, music and silence, but it fastens together two disjointed statements, which in tandem prove difficult to decipher: you either can hear them as saying 'start playing some music – it's too quiet at the moment', or as announcing the starting up and then the cessation of music: 'Sound the flute. Good. Now it's mute again.' As often in Blake, there is the glimmer of an indication that all is not as harmonious as seems, or that perfect harmonies, at least, are all the more open to discord for their sure-sounding confidence. The rhymes in the second stanza fall less happily into place. 'Boy' and 'joy' is straightforward enough, but those which follow are all off-rhymes: 'Girl'/'small', 'crow'/'you', 'voice'/'noise'. Is there a point to this? The way that that final pairing draws attention to matters of sound (if only by not quite sounding right) suggests Blake is at least partly conscious of what he is doing, and the effect might be to create a kind of delight in disorder, an accompaniment to the untutored exuberance of 'Infant noise'. After that, the rhymes of the final stanza are different again: two full rhymes ('Lamb'/'am', 'pull'/'Wool') are interspersed with one weirdly unnerving off-rhyme ('lick'/'neck') and an inspired and surprising mis-hit, 'kiss'/'face', which lands wide of the sort of verbal 'kiss' that perfect rhymes manifest. In a poem so light on its feet, the moment is more intriguing for its lack of context: the mood remains jovial, but the non-rhyme hints at something potentially awry beneath the surface.

Like Blake, Coleridge valued what he called in *Biographia Literaria* poetry's 'sense of musical delight and power of producing it'.¹² As Olivia Reilly shows in her essay, rhyme in 'Kubla Khan' takes a position at the centre of a

tissue of sonic effects which, through an ‘interplay of retrospection and anticipation’, dramatise the creation of poetic meaning. And like Blake, too, Coleridge was alive to the ways in which the failures of rhyme might disturb poetry’s ‘music’ suggestively. The success of Coleridge’s ballad imitation in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ owes something to his incorporation of defectively-rhymed stanzas which carry an air of rough-edged authenticity, at the same time as they discover in their hobbled rhyming an expressive purpose:

The western wave was all a-flame.
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright Sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the Sun.
(171-6)¹³

The repetition of ‘Sun’ in this extended ballad stanza (and its reappearance three times, twice as a rhyme word, in the next nine lines) exerts a disconcerting pressure: the sun hangs in the sky ‘As if through a dungeon-grate he peered / With broad and burning face’, and the rhymes hang in the verse with a similar accusatory force.

‘The weakest way in which two rhymes can chime’, says John Hollander in a nicely self-performing couplet, ‘Is with the most expected kind of rhyme’.¹⁴ Romantic poets often thought along similar lines, and off-rhyming plays an important role in what Shelley called in *A Defence of Poetry* the ‘vitally metaphorical’ power of Romantic poets’ language – a means through which language ‘marks’ or struggles to mark ‘the before unapprehended relation of things’.¹⁵ In the *Biographia* Coleridge took an implicit liking to a widely used

off-rhyming pair when he adduced some favourite lines from Burns's *Tam o'Shanter*, comparing the experience of 'pleasure' to the way 'snow falls upon the river / A moment white – then gone for ever', as evidence of genius's power to instil the familiar with 'a child's sense of wonder and novelty':

Who has not a thousand times seen snow fall on water? Who has not watched it with a new feeling, from the time that he has read Burns' comparison of sensual pleasure, 'To snow that falls upon a river / A moment white – then gone for ever' (*BL* i. 81).

Coleridge misappropriates as well as misquotes Burns's lines (the first should read 'Or like the snow falls in the river'); but you can forgive him for turning a moral warning about the transience of pleasure into an image that celebrates the beauty of transience itself. In so doing he brings out a quality implicit in Burns' off-rhyme, where half-disharmony catches a sound already on the path to evanescence. Coleridge was drawn to the same rhyme in 'Kubla Khan', imagining how the fountain 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever / It flung up momentarily the sacred river' (23-4). There, the fleeting movement between real and 'sacred' worlds catches a creative energy which, unfolding 'momently', can never be stilled into focus (it happens 'in that moment, and in all moments', as Reilly says). The 'river'/'ever' rhyme does similar work for Shelley at the start of 'Mont Blanc', as he imagines the sound made by a 'feeble brook' in a wood,

Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.
(9-11)

‘[F]or ever’/‘river’ bears, in William Keach’s words, ‘a certain probing openness’,¹⁶ as though rhyme’s self-knowing imperfectness falls short of containing what Shelley described in a note to the poem as the ‘untameable wildness’ of the scene. But if rhyme cannot ‘tame’ all that ‘bursts and raves’, it does enough to ‘contend’ by way of a sonorous insistence (the rhyme playing diminished echoes in ‘Over’ and ‘raves’) which places imaginative markers upon vastness ‘without giving a closed or determinate pattern to an experience which defies structuring and shaping’ (Keach, 671). (Byron, with a teasing lack of art, turns the same rhyme into a boasting comment upon Juan’s prowess as a swimmer: ‘And having learnt to swim in that sweet river, / Had often turn’d the art to some account: / A better swimmer you could scarce see ever’ (II. 835-7).)

Where Shelley’s ‘probing’ off-rhyme gestures towards his alluringly puzzled effort to comprehend the relations between ‘things’ and ‘imaginings’ (‘Mont Blanc’, 1, 143), rhymes (even apparently ‘good’ ones) throw into relief Coleridge’s similar habit of worrying over the power or lack of power that the ‘human mind’ holds ‘above nature’.¹⁷ The third verse paragraph of ‘Dejection: An Ode’ closes with a couplet expressing Coleridge’s grief at his flat, unWordsworthian response to the natural world:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within!
(45-6)

The skill of the writing exists not just in the rhyme itself, where the gathering of ‘win’ into ‘within’ enacts the process of having to look within oneself to uncover

the 'passion and the life'; but also in those sounds which endeavour to shape correspondences between 'outward forms' and inner life:

I may not hope from outward *forms* to win
The passion and the life, whose *fountains* are within!

But in the end such correspondences feel sadly dubious; and it is tempting to look back at 'I may not hope' as giving voice only to a failing wish to hope. 'Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouny', though unrhymed, moves in a similar way to intuit an underlying coherence in the 'sweet' sounds of nature:

Yet, like some sweet beguiling melody,
So sweet, we know not we are listening to it,
Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought,
Yea, with my Life and Life's own secret Joy.
(17-20)

There is the shadow of an *abba* rhyme scheme composed of half rhymes ('melody'/'it'/'thought'/'joy'), though it is hard to say whether this is intentional or just a trick of the mind: 'we know not we are listening to it'. But this elusive music makes for a moment of genius, since it mirrors the experience which the lines describe of finding harmony in nature whilst not feeling wholly in harmony with it. The 'sweet beguiling melody' sneaks up on us, and is so 'beguiling' because its presence is only dimly perceived as a 'secret Joy'. Rhyme becomes something like a mode of intuition, a means through which a poem listens to the world and even overhears itself doing so.

Romantic poetry's best-known moment of listening comes at the imaginative climax of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale':

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

(51-60)

At first, the rhymes are 'soft', and hardly noticeable. Part of what makes Keats's 'breath' so 'quiet' is the unobtrusiveness of 'time' and 'rhyme' and 'Death' and 'breath' as rhyme pairings. The rhymes are 'mused' in the sense of being well-chosen, but also of being time-honoured: it is as though reaching the heart of vision means discovering the permanent relations of things, even as Keats finally laments the impermanence of vision itself. As the stanza unfolds, it 'listens' to its own rhyming music. 'Die' sings plaintively through 'midnight', 'thy', 'ecstasy', and 'I' to reach a crescendo in the almost overly-intense lyricism of 'To *thy high requiem*'. But the rhyming patterns of that final line tell the story of vision's collapse: 'requiem' echoes (with a slight decline in pitch) into 'become', as though trying to harmonise a whole stanza's rhyme scheme in one swoop, but the music comes thudding down with the ungainly off-rhyming contraction of 'soul abroad' within that dullest of final monosyllables, 'sod' (clinching possibly the best bad rhyme in English poetry).

Keats's intricate and original stanza forms in his odes developed out of his experiments with the sonnet: 'For as always when he went back to the lyric,' as Walter Jackson Bate once put the matter, 'the sonnet stood in his way'.¹⁸ But if Bate was thinking about the sonnet's formal stringency as a kind of

immovable barricade (and it is principally through its rhymes that the form digs its heels in), Keats's own reflections on rhyme in his inventively-rhymed sonnet 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd' unhinge the metaphor of rhyme as a 'bond' upon imaginative expression by discovering how formal 'chains' might have a concatenating effect as well: Keats's happy rhyme on 'be' (11) and 'free' (13), for instance, breaks away from the shackling 'chain'd'/'constrain'd' (1, 4) pairing earlier on as though partially to liberate 'the Muse' who 'we cannot let [...] be free' (13), even as the final line reminds us that such freedom must be found within the sonnet's 'bounds' (14). And whilst it would hardly be accurate to make claims for the development of complicatedly rhymed stanzas as a uniquely Romantic affair, a relish for the formal tapestries woven by rhyme lies somewhere near the heart of Romantic poetry's achievement. Such intricate formal constructions have proved daunting inspiration for later poets. Madeleine Callaghan's essay in this issue establishes Yeats as one post-Romantic poet who found in Romantic poets' rhymed forms 'a virtuosic example whose spirit he could capture even as he underscored his individuality'.

It 'has been said to contain in itself a constant appeal to memory and hope',¹⁹ Arthur Hallam declared of rhyme in 1831, and it is for its capacity to honour and to create anew that rhyme operates productively for the poets of the 1820s and 30s. In Clare's poetry rhyme often has a propulsive quality: the earlier Romantics' readiness to surrender to rhyme's impetus is taken to an extreme. 'In spite of every difficulty rhyme will come to the end of my pen' Clare wrote to Henry Cary, the translator of Dante, in 1832, 'I am pleased it

gives me extra gratification & so in spite of myself I rhyme on'.²⁰ The sonnet 'I feel I am – I only know I am' balances a feeling of anguished self-entrapment against a Byronic sense of how identity flares into life in the act of writing:

I feel I am; – I only know I am,
And plod upon the earth as dull and void:
Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed,
I fled to solitudes from passion's dream,
But strife pursued – I only know, I am,
I was a being created in the race
Of men disdaining bounds of place and time: –
A spirit that could travel o'er the space
Of earth & heaven, – like a thought sublime,
Tracing creation, like my maker, free –
A soul unshackled – like eternity,
Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall.
But now I only know I am, – that's all.²¹

The rhyming shows Clare as among the most inventive misshapers of the sonnet in the period. The first six lines, rhymed *ababaa*, form a ramshackle sestet, the rhythms of their largely endstopped lines plodding like the existence they describe, and the abrupt return in the sixth line to the words that close the first (in a rhyme that is flatly a repetition, so that the reiteration of the words 'I am' sounds at once insistent and hollow) catches Clare's feelings of constraint within himself: 'I only know I am'. But this repetition is the trigger for the writing to 'unshackle' itself from the 'bounds of place and time'. You can hear the poem lurching into life as the syntax heaves itself back into the past over the line break: 'I am, | I was'. If the lines that follow gain in poignancy from being coloured by the past tense, they also surf the energies of rhyme to chase in their surging enjambments (which 'travel o'er the space') an endless state of becoming. The well-worn rhyme of 'free' and 'eternity' is primed to press home

imaginative transcendence, but the poetry's vaunting self-assertion is checked by that half-puzzled, half-resigned shrug: 'But now I only know I am, – that's all'. A prosy tag which closes up the poem's final rhyme (not unlike Keats's 'sod'), it re-asserts the affecting note of self-weariness which Clare cannot ultimately 'spurn'.

For other poets of the 1820s and 30s, rhyme channels more self-consciously introspective currents. Thomas Lovell Beddoes's lines from a song in *Death's Jest-Book*, ask, as T. S. Eliot pointed out in *The Three Voices of Poetry*, the question faced by any embryonic poem:²²

Squats on a toad-stool under a tree
 A bodiless childfull of life in the gloom,
 Crying with frog voice, 'What shall I be?'
 Poor unborn ghost, for my mother killed me
 Scarcely alive in her wicked womb.
(*Death's Jest-Book*, III. iii. 361-5)²³

For another poet that rhyme on 'be' and 'me' might have provoked claustrophobic questions about the determinism of the self (though the pronoun doesn't feature in Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be' is of course unswervingly about 'me'). But for Beddoes it spawns a grotesque creativity that unspools a catalogue of answers through a series of stanzas whose irregularities bear out the credo of their speaker, Isbrand, in his lines immediately preceding the song: 'I hate your ballads that are made to come round / Like a squirrel's cage, and round again. / We nightingales sing boldly from our hearts' (III. iii. 324-6). Beddoes displays his zany charm as he entertains the possibility of becoming what Michael O'Neill describes, in a phrase which lives up to Beddoes's own delight in incongruity, as a 'grimly fetching' hedgehog:²⁴

I much prefer *your* black-lipped snout,
Little, gruntless, fairy hog,
Godson of the hawthorn hedge.
For, when Ringwood snuffs me out,
And 'gins my tender paunch to grapple,
Sing, 'Twixt your ancles visage wedge,
And roll up like an apple.'
(III. iii. 346-52)

The image matches grotesquery with tenderness, and the idiom seems an odd mixture of nursery-rhyme and something like a foretaste of Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*. Rhymes are a central part of that rolled up mixture: Beddoes relishes the bolted-together feel he gets from wedging unpromising words into rhyme positions at irregular intervals. When the poem does 'come round' again to the nightingale, it is only to snuff out the tradition of elevated poetic 'song' inherited from Coleridge and Keats:

I'll not be a fool, like the nightingale,
Who sits up all midnight, without any ale,
Making a noise with its nose.
(III. iii. 356-8)

'Making a *noise* with its *nose*' itself makes an awkward 'noise', the ingenious debasing of the nightingale's song going hand in hand with the discordant creativity that the line offers (as does the rhyme that sets 'nightingale' against 'any ale', which tickles on account of its intimation that the nightingale should know better than to have a night off the booze).

But Beddoes also found in rhyme a way of responding to the pathos of his status as an 'unborn ghost'. He was just as alert to rhyme's appeal to memory, and its ability to call up the past, as he was ready to revel in it as the vehicle for a boisterously new poetic art. His 'Lines, Written at Geneva; July

1824' describe a landscape which embodies the poetry's own twilit Romanticism. The poem, composed mostly of heroic couplets, begins with a triplet, as though to express a lingering attachment to the imaginative 'day' it must leave behind:

The hour is starry, and the airs that stray,
Sad wanderers from their golden home of day,
On night's black mountain, melt and fade away
In sorrow that is music.

(1-4)

Among the 'airs' Beddoes has in mind is the music of his own poetry, as it departs from the 'golden home' of high Romantic achievement ('the airs that stray' sounding like someone getting muddled up while trying to repeat 'The hour is starry'). And throughout, the writing's imaginative struggle is embodied and enacted through rhymes and sounds which 'melt and fade away'. The poem evokes a silence so absolute that it moves to wonder:

Or was there ever sound, or can what was
Now be so dead? Although no flowers or grass
Grow from the corpse of a deceased sound,
Somewhat, methinks, should mark the air around
Its dying place and tomb,
A gentle music, or a pale perfume:
For hath it not a body and a spirit,
A noise and meaning? and, when one doth hear it
Twice born, twice dying, doubly found and lost,
That second self, that echo, is its ghost.

(10-17)

Beddoes's lines create their own 'gentle music', filling, even as they describe, the silence left by the 'deceased sound'. Rhymes fuel a poetry that wavers between the urbanely sceptical and the lyrically tender, as Beddoes's conceits walk a tightrope: of course 'no flowers or grass / Grow from the corpse of a

deceased sound', but the colloquial ease of the rhyme on 'grass' and 'was' and the winning speculativeness of Beddoes's 'Somewhat, methinks', fend off objections. There is then a coy decorum to the shortened line as it leaves a respectful silence in the wake of the notion that something should 'mark the air around / Its dying place and tomb.' Rhyme enters into metaphorical relationship with Beddoes's theme as he imagines sounds 'Twice born, twice dying' in an 'echo'. If the lines themselves echo a mode of Romantic imagining, then Beddoes's shift into 'pale' half-rhyme ('spirit'/'hear it', 'lost'/'ghost') at once concedes that any effort to replicate the achievements of that mode are bound to distort them, and embraces an energy that 'Grow[s] from the corpse' into a new sort of 'sound'.

Defective rhymes give 'noise and meaning' to diminished poetic times. In a quatrain titled 'The Nineteenth Century and After', Yeats looked back to the Romantic poets with a feeling that they spoke with a magniloquence no longer attainable:

Though the great song return no more
 There's keen delight in what we have:
 The rattle of pebbles on the shore
 Under the receding wave.²⁵

In so tightly folded a unit of verse, the imperfect sounds of 'have'/'wave' (a rhyme to the eye, but not quite to the ear) are already 'receding', making palpable Yeats's intimations about the disappearance of Romanticism's 'great song'. Yeats's 'rattle of pebbles' is a washed up version of 'the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back' in Arnold's 'Dover Beach' (10-11).²⁶ '[W]e / Find [...] in the sound' of waves 'a thought' (18-19), Arnold writes, and his

poem's irregularly- and internally-rhymed lines 'bring / The eternal note of sadness in' (13-14). Yet for all Arnold's responsiveness to the 'ebb and flow' (17) of feeling, his poem begins and ends with the same word, 'night' (1, 37) – making a full rhyme whose reach holds all the turbulence in some sort of check, and engulfs every word in darkness. Rhymes in Arnold's verse can sound as though something has gone wrong with them (in the case of 'night', wrong because the sombre repetition is too right), or as though they are intuiting something wrong with the world to which they answer. As Seamus Perry shows in his essay in this issue, Arnold's deftly methodless method of misrhyming 'becomes in his self-consciously modern sensibility the way to an uneasy new kind of poetry, authenticated by its feelings of self-mistrust.'

Romantic poetry's exuberant excavation of rhyme's possibilities is 'doubly found and lost' by later poets. If it opens up new vistas of rhyming practice, it also leads towards twentieth-century inventiveness in varieties of off- and un-rhymed free verse. The paths of influence forged are as various as the poets that follow them. In the closing essay of this issue, Stacey McDowell returns to matters of choice and determination to show how questions 'surrounding the agency of decision making' expressed through rhyme in Wordsworth's poetry are revisited by Norman Nicholson. Tracing continuities between Wordsworth's 'Yarrow Unvisited' and Nicholson's 'Askam Unvisited', her essay sees rhyme as answering simultaneously to a belief in 'freedom of choice' and a need for 'underlying design'. Rhyme, here as elsewhere in Romantic and post-Romantic verse, is an agent of suggestion as well as

constraint, a means through which, in the words of Nicholson's 'St. Luke's Summer', 'Never-predicted poetry is sown' (15).²⁷

¹ 'Preface [to *Lyrical Ballads*]', in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York, 2014), 76-96, 84. We quote Wordsworth's verse from this edition.

² William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London, 1818), 318.

³ Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2012), 12.

⁴ Leigh Hunt, 'Preface' to *The Story of Rimini, A Poem* (London, 1816), xiv.

⁵ We quote Byron's verse from *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford, 2000).

⁶ 'The Verse', in *Paradise Lost*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harmondsworth, 1971), 1. We quote Milton from this edition hereafter.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*', *New Statesman*, 8 (March 1917), 518-19.

⁸ Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition. In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (Leeds, 1966), 60.

⁹ *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York, 2009), 46-9. All quotations from Keats are taken from this edition hereafter.

¹⁰ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York, 1989), 380, 394.

¹¹ 'To the Public', *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion, Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York, 2007), 211.

¹² *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), ii. 20. Hereafter *BL*.

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- ¹³ Coleridge's *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York, 2004), 59-99. We quote Coleridge's verse from this edition hereafter.
- ¹⁴ John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (New Haven, 1981), 14.
- ¹⁵ 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), 674-701, 676. We quote Shelley's verse from this edition.
- ¹⁶ William Keach, 'Rhyme and the Arbitrariness of Language', rpt in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, 2002), 669-75, 671.
- ¹⁷ *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (2 vols, London, 1969), i. 498.
- ¹⁸ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), 495.
- ¹⁹ *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T. H. V. Motter (New York, 1943), 222.
- ²⁰ John Clare, letter to Henry Francis Cary, 20(?) October 1832 in *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford, 1985), 595-6.
- ²¹ *John Clare: The Major Works*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford, 2004), 361-2.
- ²² See T. S. Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry (1953)', in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), 89-102, 98.
- ²³ *The Works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, ed. H. W. Donner, (London, 1935), 89. All further references are to this edition.
- ²⁴ Michael O'Neill, "'The latch-string of a new world's wicket": Poetry and Agency in *Death's Jest-Book*; or, *The Fool's Tragedy*', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, ed. Ute Berns and Michael Bradshaw (Aldershot, 2007), 33-47, 41.
- ²⁵ *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1992), 290.
- ²⁶ *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), 239-43.
- ²⁷ *Collected Poems*, ed. Neil Curry (London, 1994), 132.